DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 178 EA 025 788

AUTHOR	Thompson, James
TITLE	Systemic Education Reform. ERIC Digest, Number 90.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, Oreg.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-EA-94-5
PUB DATE	May 94
CONTRACT	RR93002006
NOTE	3p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, University of Oregon, 1787 Agate Street, Eugene, OR 97403 (free; $2.50 postage and handling).
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Administrator Role; *Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Leadership Responsibility; Partnerships in Education; Principals; School Based Management; *School Restructuring; Socioeconomic Influences; Superintendents; *Systems Approach
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; *Systemic Change

ABSTRACT

Economic forces and educational equity issues have combined to heighten calls for improved education for all students. Systemic reform calls for education to be reconceptualized from the ground up, beginning with the nature of teaching and learning, educational relationships, and school-community relationships. One of the assumptions made by educational theorists is that a thorough understanding of academic content, complex thinking, and problem-solving is necessary for students to become responsible citizens. If systemic reform is to succeed, leadership must be present. Superintendents' new duties include helping to establish organizational vision and mission. Principals are in a position to help others in the school understand their unique role in systemic change. School boards can help provide vision for the school system, support change, arrange collaborative relationships with other agencies, and focus on the strategic direction of the school. (Contains 10 references.) (MLF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 370 178

ERIC DIGEST

MAY 1994 NUMBER 90 EDO-EA-94-5

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Systemic Education Reform

by James Thompson

After more than a decade of marginally effective reform, diverse stakeholders are coming to the same conclusion: Demanding more from our schools is not enough—the system itself (at local, district, and state levels) must be fundamentally changed. Piecemeal reform efforts of the past, some suggest, have been tantamount to applying a bandaid to assuage schools' ills when what is needed is major surgery.

Systemic reform is proposed as an alternative to tinkering and add-on programs that, critics say, will not meet the demands of business, parents, communities, and students for fundamental change and significant improvement in schools.

Although support for systemic reform has been growing, change is never easy. Many superintendents, school boards, and principals harbor concerns about how the roles that are familiar to them will be affected by systemic reform.

Why Is Systemic Reform Necessary?

Much of the push for systemic reform stems from a recognition that the nation's social and economic structure has changed.

The changes in traditional family structure, an increase in child poverty, the inadequacy of social-welfare and social-service programs, and a decreased sense of civic responsibility are among the factors that are directly or indirectly placing new expectations on educators (Conley 1993). Economic forces and educational equity issues have combined to heighten calls for improved education for all students.

Although society's needs have changed radically since public schools were first instituted in America, many outdated and ineffectual purposes and methods have been retained by schools.

Recent societal changes have made education "essential to livelihood" (Schlechty 1990). As workers are increasingly expected to weather multiple career changes, it is imperative for schools to emphasize the importance of lifelong learning, strengthen students' thinking and problem-solving skills, and increase their adaptability. Reformers hope that by "totally rethinking the very structure of the education system," schools will be better prepared to meet the needs of all children and the communities in which they live (Education Commission of the States 1991).

While raising student achievement is a central goal of systemic reform, it is also crucial for a reconfigured educational system to ensure that students are taught how to apply what they learn in education and in life.

What Are the Essential Elements of Systemic Reform?

It is important to keep in mind that systemic reform is not so much a detailed prepscription for improving education as a philosophy advocating reflecting, rethinking, and restructuring. Unlike reform efforts that are more limited in scope, systemic reform pervades almost every aspect of schooling. It calls for education to be reconceptualized from the ground up, beginning with the nature of teaching and learning, educational relationships, and school-community relationships.

According to David Florio of the National Science Foundation, common themes in systemic reform include a greater emphasis on depth of knowledge, new relationships between people, more flexible physical arrangements in schools, and restructured time schedules (Lewis 1989).

Conley's conceptualization of educational restructuring dovetails with the goals of systemic reform. He sets forth a framework of twelve dimensions of educational restructuring that are grouped into three subsets: central, enabling, and supporting variables. *Learner outcomes, curriculum, instruction,* and *assessment* make up the central variables, labeled as such because they have a powerful direct effect on student learning. Enabling variables, also closely related to instruction, consist of *learning environment, technology, school-community relations,* and *time*. Supporting variables, those further removed from the classroom, consist of *governance, teacher leadership, personnel structures,* and *working relationships*.

Many definitions of systemic reform make reference to school-based decision-making, which grants those closest to the learning process more say in how learning takes place. In a school-based management structure, the emphasis is on empowering and fostering creativity in others rather than trying to

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ERIC

EA 025 788

control them (Barrett 1991).

Above all, schools must reinvigorate programs and services for children, expand the roles of all education stakeholders, free themselves from oversight that stifles innovation, and reconceptualize traditional accountability as quality assurance (Bamberger 1991).

How Does Systemic Reform Affect Schools?

Systemic reform requires change on many levels, but change at the school site often is deemed the most important. Conley notes school-level changes are the most difficult to achieve because they influence what and how subjects are taught as well as how progress is measured and evaluated.

O'Day and Smith (1993) suggest that the greatest promise of systemic education reform may be its potential to overcome educational and, to a lesser degree, societal inequalities. They contend that a systemic state approach coupled with greater local-professional responsibility can provide the structure that is needed to improve education for all children. Two assumptions made by O'Day and Smith are that a thorough understanding of academic content, complex thinking, and problem-solving is necessary for students to become responsible citizens, and that all students are capable of learning challenging content and complex problem-solving skills.

What Are the Roles of the Superintendent and Principal?

If systemic reform is to succeed, leadership must be present. It is important for individuals in the upper levels of an organization to demonstrate support for and understanding of the need for change (Barkley and Castle 1993).

Characteristics of true leadership include personal vision, realism, willingness to change and take risks, and ability to build community support for change (Lewis).

To prepare superintendents to be leaders in fundamental education reform, Murphy (1991) asserts that three changes must occur: Administrator preparation programs must be revitalized, the working conditions of superintendents must be improved and the superintendent-school board relationship clarified, and "our images of bold leadership and the people who exercise it" must be altered.

Some of the new duties superintendents face under systemic reform include helping to establish organizational vision and mission, planning and coordination, facilitating change, spanning institutional gaps, communicating, resolving conflicts, and improving organizational efficiency (Conley).

Increased responsibility and shifting roles among teachers, students, and administrators are things principals must contend with under systemic reform. Because they are in touch with all members of the school community, principals are more aware of the complex relationships in schools, which enables them to help others in the school understand their unique role in systemic change.

How Do School Boards Fit into Systemic Reform?

School boards can help provide vision for the school system, support change, arrange collaborative relationships with other agencies to ensure integrated services, and work toward shared decision-making. However, a board's ability to successfully promote change is related to its stability, unity, and knowledge base (Bacharach 1990).

Conley notes that although some school boards are becoming increasingly mired in politics and micromanagement, others are backing off and focusing on the strategic direction of the school. These boards function much like a "board of directors." They concern themselves with education and educational outcomes rather than managerial responsibilities.

Systemic reform is a broad and often ambiguous concept. However, if it is viewed not as a fast-acting formula to cure all of education's ills but as a philosophy that advocates reflecting, rethinking, and restructuring, it has great potential to improve education.

RESOURCES

Bacharach, Samuel B., Editor. *Education Reform: Making Sense of It All.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1990. 440 pages.

Bamberger, Richard, Editor. *Developing Leaders for Restructuring Schools: New Habits of Mind and Heart.* Arlington, Virginia: American Association of School Administrators, 1991. 72 pages.

Barkley, Jr., Robert, and Shari Castle. "Principles and Actions: A Framework for Systemic Change." National Education Association, National Center for Innovation. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, April 1993. 53 pages. ED 361 851.

Barrett, Peter A., Editor. *Doubts and Certainties: Working Together to Restructure Schools.* Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1991. 191 pages. ED 336 867.

Conley, David T. *Roadmap to Restructuring: Policies, Practices and the Emerging Visions of Schooling.* Eugene, Oregon: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, University of Oregon, 1993. 432 pages. ED 359 593.

Education Commission of the States. *Exploring Policy Options to Restructure Education.* Denver, Colorado: Author, 1991. 95 pages. ED 332 323.

Lewis, Anne. *Restructuring America's Schools.* Arlington, Virginia: American Association of School Administrators, 1989. 250 pages. ED 314 820.

Murphy, Jerome T. "Superintendents as Saviors: From the Terminator to Pogo." *Phi Delta Kappan* 72, 7 (March 1991): 507-13. EJ 422 810.

O'Day, Jennifer A., and Marshall S. Smith. "Systemic Reform Educational Opportunity." In *Designing Coherent Education Policy: Improving the System,* edited by Susan H. Fuhrman. 250-312. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993. ED 359 626.

Schlechty, Phillip C. *Schools for the Twenty-first Century: Leadership Imperatives for Educational Reform.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990. 164 pages.

A Product of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management • College of Education, University of Oregon • Eugene, Oregon 97403

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract No. OERI RR93002006. The ideas and opinions expressed in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, ED, or the Clearinghouse. This Digest is in the public domain and may be freely reproduced. EA 025 788.